

Death of a Salesman
Study Guide

Vocabulary

approbation – approval

audacity – daring

candid – honest

credulous – gullible; caused by a readiness to believe

dormer – window projecting from the roof

elegiac – mournful

gratis – free

implacable – impossible to appease

incipient – beginning to develop

laconic – using few words

mercurial – lively and unpredictable; easily changing, moody

philanderer – one who has casual affairs with women

raucous – unpleasantly loud

simonize – wax; polish

stolid – not excitable

Questions

Act One (pages 1-30)

1. What role will the music and scenery play in the action of the play according to the initial stage directions?

The music and scenery will help the audience to differentiate between Willy's fantasies and reality.

2. What happens while Willy is driving?

He is not able to focus and begins to drive off the road.

3. Why is Willy disappointed in Biff?

He is disappointed that Biff is not settled or established at 34; Biff has never made more than \$35 a week.

4. How does Willy contradict himself in his conversation with Linda? He talks about being able to open the windshield and then says the windshields on new cars don't open; he tells Linda that Biff is a lazy bum and then says that if there is one thing about Biff he is not lazy.

5. List some of the things that Willy complains about during this conversation?

The apartment building behind him, too many people, he can't grow anything outside, cheese, etc. He rants jumping from topic to topic during a lengthy monologue.

6. Describe Biff and Happy. What do they seem to want?

Biff – 34 unsettled, likes to work outside, former athlete, seems defeated. Biff seems to want a job where he can work outside and not have to answer to anyone.

Happy – 32 – womanizer, has a job and an apartment. Although he seems more successful he is not settled. He is lonely and unhappy with his lack of progress in his career.

7. What does Happy call Biff?

An idealist.

8. Why is Happy dissatisfied with his life?

Happy is dissatisfied because he thinks he is better, more athletic, than the people for whom he works.

9. What does Happy do to the executives for whom he works?

Happy seduces their wives and girlfriends and then goes to their weddings.

10. Why does Biff want to go talk to Bill Oliver?
He wants to ask for some money to start a business.

11. What do Happy and Biff overhear?
They overhear Willy talking to himself during one of his alluciations.

12. How did Biff get the football he practices with in the flashback? How does Willy react to this?

Biff stole the football; at first Willy in angry but then he excuses it saying that the coach should congratulate Biff on his initiatiove.

Page 30-60

13. Describe Bernard.

Good student, reliable, he has been helping Biff cheat.

14. Why is Bernard worried about Biff?

He is worried that Biff is going to fail math.

15. How does the relationship Willy has with his sons in the flashback sequence differ from the one he currently has with them?

They clearly used to look up to him; now they either resent him or feel sorry for hm.

16. What do we find out about Willy's career as a salesman?

Willy has been put on commission like beginner; he is not earning any money and has to borrow money from Charlie every week.

17. Who is the woman? What do we learn about Willy's relationship with her?

She is a woman Willy had an affair with when he would travel to Boston.

18. Describe Willy's reaction to Linda mending her stockings. Why does he react this way?

He is upset because Linda is trying to fix old stockings to save \$ and he gave his mistress new stockings as a present.

19. Describe Charley.

Willy's neighbor, successful, he tries to help Willy whenever he can by giving him money.

20. Charley tells Willy, When a deposit bottle is broken you don't get your money back. What does he mean by this?

Even though Willy has invested so much time and effort in Biff he has to accept that it may never "pay off".

21. Who is Ben? What does Willy say about him?

Ben is Willy's brother; he has just died. Willy says that he was very rich.

22. Why do Charley and Willy argue?

Willy is hallucinating loses track of the game and accuses Charley at cheating at cards.

23. How does Ben seem to feel about Willy's job? What advice does he give Biff?

Ben is not very impressed by Willy's job; he does not believe the rewards are tangible.

Ben advises Biff never to fight fair with a stranger (you will never get out of the jungle that way).

24. Happy keeps mentioning that he lost weight. Why is he doing this?

He is jealous of the attention that Biff gets and wants to get some attention for himself.

25. How does Charley try to caution Willy about Biff?

Charley tries to warn Willy that Biff will end up in jail if he does not stop stealing.

26. Why did Willy pawn the diamond that Ben gave him?
He sold it to pay for radio correspondence classes for Biff.

27. When does Linda say Willy's hallucinations are the worst?
She claims they are the worst when Biff comes home.

28. Linda states on page 56 that attention must be paid to someone like Willy. Discuss the context and significance of this statement.
Linda is saying that even though Willy is not important and has never had his name in the paper, he is still hard working and deserves some respect and consideration. This response fits in with the overall theme of Linda defending Willy and his actions.

29. How does Linda criticize the treatment Willy receives from others?
She says that people do not show Willy enough respect; he is treated as a beginner at work and his sons do not show him respect either. He does not make a salary any more and has to borrow money from Charley.

29. Why is Linda afraid that Willy is dying? What evidence does she have?
She thinks Willy is trying to kill himself; they have witnesses saying the car crashes were not accidents, and Linda found some tubing that she thinks Willy is planning on attaching to the furnace.

Page 60 – end of Act I

30. Why does Happy criticize Biff's ability to succeed in business?
Happy thinks Biff doesn't try hard enough; he points out Biff whistling in the elevator.

31. List some of the advice Willy gives Biff before his meeting with Bill Oliver. Don't talk to much, don't pick up anything, dress well, be respectful but authoritative, don't make too many jokes, etc.

32. Why does Biff get angry at Willy at the end of their conversation about Bill Oliver?

Biff gets angry because Willy is yelling at Linda because she keeps interrupting him.

33. How does Happy try to get attention in this scene?

He tells everyone that he is getting married.

Beginning of Act 2 – page 85

34. What is Willy going to do on his way home from work? Why?

He is going to get seeds; he wants to try to grow a garden in the backyard again.

35. How much does Linda imagine Biff will ask Bill Oliver for?

She imagines he will ask for ten to fifteen thousand dollars.

36. What will Willy be making the last payment on soon?

He will be making his last mortgage payment on the house.

37. Who is Willy supposed to meet for dinner? Where?

He is supposed to meet Happy and Biff at a restaurant called Frank's Chop House.

38. Who does Willy go to see? Why?

Willy goes to see Howard to try to get a transfer to New York so he does not have to travel any more, since he is having trouble driving.

39. How does Willy describe the death and funeral of the 84-year old salesman to Howard?

He says that he died on a train and many people came to the funeral because he was important and well liked; he was able to make a living until he died and was so well known he did not even have to leave his room. The salesman's name was Dave Singleman.

40. What does Willy mean when he says “ You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away”? (page 82)

The end of the line is a man is not a piece of fruit. Willy means that you cannot use someone to make a profit and then when they are older and not as profitable throw them away like a piece of garbage.

41. What does Howard tell Willy to do after he fires him?

He tells him to ask his sons for help.

42. Why does Willy decide not to go to Alaska with Ben?

Linda encourages him to stay because he is supposedly doing so well selling.

Page 85-100

43. Who does Willy go to see after he leaves Howard’s office?

He goes to see Charley to ask for money; he sees Bernard while he is there.

44. What do we learn about Biff from this conversation?

The audience learns that Biff did not give up on himself until after he went to see Willy in Boston.

45. Why does Willy call Charley an ignoramus?

He is upset that Charlie offers him a job; he is too full of pride to take a job from Charley.

46. Who is Stanley?

Stanley is the waiter at the restaurant where Willy meets his sons for dinner.

Page 100-115

47. What is the “girl’s” name?

Miss Forsythe

48. What happened during Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver?
Oliver made him wait for 6 hours and then did not remember Biff;
Biff stole his fountain pen.
49. What was Biff's real position when he worked for Oliver? What had they been saying it was?
They had been saying that he was a salesman for Oliver; he was actually a shipping clerk.
50. What did Biff take from Oliver's office?
He took Bill Oliver's fountain pen and then ran away.
51. What is Willy hallucinating about in the restaurant?
Willy is hallucinating about Biff catching him with his mistress in Boston. Willy has just made the connection between Biff giving up on himself and his discovery of Willy's infidelity after the conversation with Bernard.
52. How does Biff describe Willy to Miss Forsythe?
He describes him as a fine troubled prince who is always for his sons.
53. How does Happy respond when questioned about Willy in the restaurant scene?
He denies that Willy is really his father.
- Page 116-136
54. Why does Biff go to Boston?
Biff goes to Boston to ask for Willy's help in talking to his math teacher Mr. Birnbaum.

55. What does he find out there?
He discovers Willy's affair.

56. What do we find out is significant about the stockings?
Willy gave his mistress Linda's stockings and Linda tries to mend old ones because they are so expensive.

57. How does Linda treat Happy and Biff when they return from the restaurant? Why?
She is angry with them for leaving Willy there alone. She claims that they would not do that to a stranger.

58. What does Willy do when he returns home? What is the significance of this?
He begins to plan a garden in the middle of the night. He wants to leave something behind because he is planning his own death.

59. What is Willy's plan for Linda? Who does he believe he is talking to?
Willy believes that he is talking to Ben; he believes that Linda will receive twenty thousand dollars in insurance money.

60. What does Willy believe his funeral will be like?
He believes that many people will attend and that Biff will be impressed.

61. What does Biff seem to want in his last scene with Willy?
He wants Willy to admit the truth and let him go.

62. Where was Biff when they could not reach him?
He was in jail for stealing a suit.

63. Why does Willy realize that Biff loves him?
Biff breaks down crying.

64. What goes through Willy's mind just prior to his suicide?
He keeps hearing Ben tell him that the jungle is dark but full of diamonds. He thinks that his family can be successful because of the money from his insurance policy.

Requiem

65. Describe Willy's funeral.

No one attended except family. Linda is unable to cry because she is in denial.

Character List

Willy – the salesman; husband of Linda, father of Happy and Biff

Biff – 34 year old son of Linda and Willy; has just returned home, is unsettled, he has a habit of stealing

Happy – 32 year old son of Linda and Willy; has a job and an apartment, is lonely, philanderer

Linda – wife of Willy; makes excuses for his behavior and failures

Ben – Willy's recently deceased wealthy brother; Ben is a predominate figure in Willy's hallucinations.

Bernard – Charley's son, smart and successful, going to argue a case in front of the supreme court, tried to help Biff cheat in high school

Charley – Willy's neighbor, very patient and generous with Willy; he gives Willy money when he stops getting paid.

Bill Oliver – a former boss of Biff's; Biff tries to set up a deal with him.

Howard – Willy's boss

Stanely – Waiter

Miss Forsythe – a woman Happy picks up at the restaurant